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Twenty-seventh special session

Summary of round tables on the theme "Renewal of commitment and future action for children in the next decade"

Round table 1

Wednesday, 8 May 2002 (afternoon)

Co-Chairs: Mr. Ion **Iliescu**, President of Romania
Mr. Nambar **Enkhbayar**, Prime Minister of Mongolia

"*We acknowledge this beautiful building that protects and unites us today.*"
Te Kerei Moka, 17, New Zealand

"*To love, care for and protect us should be a life-long privilege.*"
Caroline Barebwoha, 15, Uganda

1. Following the lead of two young delegates, education was one of the main themes addressed during the round table. Both delegates, Caroline Barebwoha and Te Kerei Moka, stressed the importance of education, especially for girls and children from indigenous groups.

2. Many participants spoke of progress in their own countries in ensuring all children's right to education. Of course, some countries have made greater progress than others, and progress has been less than satisfactory in some respects, as the Secretary-General made clear in his report, "We, the Children".

3. Education is a basic human right and one of the keys to eradicating poverty. Speakers described laws that make primary education free and compulsory and, more importantly, discussed how critical it is to ensure that this education be of high quality, take place in a safe and well-equipped environment and that teachers be well-trained. Quality pre-school education and early childhood development are fundamental to children's longer term development, followed by quality primary and secondary education.

4. The lack of financial resources continues to hinder the development of quality education, as does the lack of equipment and trained personnel in many countries.

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Many participants spoke of the importance of interregional and international cooperation in maximizing limited resources and sharing experiences.

5. Technology in education has emerged as a new priority, especially computer literacy and access to the Internet. The importance of this technology will only grow in the next decade, but as was pointed out several times, in some countries, desks, infrastructure and even electricity are still lacking in schools in many countries.

6. Another important theme was children's health and survival. Many delegates spoke of impressive achievements since 1990 in decreasing child and maternal mortality through immunization, primary health care and nutrition. However, the Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO), Dr. Gro Harlan Brundtland, said that while there has been progress since 1990, it has not been enough. The world is still not reaching the children most in need of simple, inexpensive, life-saving treatments such as immunization, oral rehydration therapy, safe deliveries and basic hygiene practices.

7. Several participants also spoke about the importance of adequate food and nutrition for children's healthy development. The Executive Director of the World Food Programme (WFP), James Morris, stressed that "a hungry child has no chance to learn, no chance to grow". In some countries, however, children face other challenges to their health, including diabetes, heart disease and obesity. Other problems facing children today include violence in schools and drug, alcohol and tobacco abuse.

8. Many delegations stressed the importance of the family to children's development and well-being, including the need for interaction between young people and their elders, and for children to be raised in their own cultures, with respect for their traditions and the natural environment. Te Kerei Moka, a young Maori, spoke of the daily battles of most indigenous people to maintain their language and traditions. "To lose one's culture is to lose one's soul", he said, "a part of you dies". It was said that even in wealthy countries, there must be better distribution of resources to ensure that minorities do not lose their right to education. In countries with large numbers of institutionalized children, efforts are under way to support families to care for their children themselves or to provide family-type care.

9. The threat of HIV/AIDS was mentioned again and again, with speakers citing continuing efforts to educate and mobilize young people against this disease, through initiatives such as life-skills training, and to prevent mother-to-child transmission of HIV. Other important efforts involve care for children orphaned or made vulnerable by AIDS.

10. Another major threat to children is continued armed conflict. The participants were reminded of the hundreds of thousands of children who have never known peace, been to school or received any health care because of war and conflict. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Rudd Lubbers, spoke about the special challenges faced by refugee children, including detention, sexual abuse and exploitation of refugee women and children. He also cited the need for education for refugee children.

11. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary Robinson, underlined the importance of children's real participation, reminding participants of the message from the Children's Forum that they want "a world fit for us". Many

speakers described children's opinion polls, elections, parliaments and other forums where children's voices can be heard. One important forum is the network of ombudspersons, or child defenders, of which there are 17 in Europe.

12. Another important issue was the question of monitoring and assessing progress in implementing the goals of the special session. One important suggestion was to encourage regional peer reviews involving national leaders, who would meet periodically to assess progress made in fulfilling their commitments. Other participants stressed the need for region-specific data to allow for more accurate reporting and for regional agendas concentrating on areas of specific interest.

13. The question of resources was raised many times, as was the importance of poverty eradication. Vast resources will be needed to achieve the targets of the special session, although resources are scarce and there is vast competition for funds. Some participants urged donors to increase resource allocations for development, including through debt cancellation. One valuable suggestion was that Governments could look again at the possibility of reducing military expenditures and using the dividends for children's health and education. As 15-year-old Caroline said, "there is a need to invest in us, the children ... we are the world's own destiny".